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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 001517

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TAGS: PHUM PREL PGOV PTER ELAB KU

SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR ENCOURAGES GOK TO ENFORCE UNDERAGE CAMEL JOCKEY BAN, PROTECT MAIDS; ISLAMIC CHARITY DONATION BOXES REMOVED

REF: KUWAIT 806

Classified By: Ambassador Richard LeBaron for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

11. (C) Summary: The Ambassador urged the Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Faisal Hajji Boukhadour to enforce a ban on the employment of underage camel jockeys and extend labor law coverage to domestic help. The Minister explained that the GOK was taking steps to ameliorate these problems but agreed to "find a better solution." He also explained that the Kuwaitization process, replacing foreign workers with Kuwaitis in the private sector, is not reaching the Ministry's targets. As for the removal of Islamic charity donation boxes, the Minister reported that 87 kiosks have been taken off Kuwait's streets. End summary.

Combating Underage Camel Jockeys

12. (C) During an April 13 call on Minister of Social Affairs and Labor Faisal Hajji Boukhadour, the Ambassador, in a discussion on labor issues, encouraged the GOK to enforce a ban on underage camel jockeys and extend labor law coverage to domestic help. Also in attendance were Adnan A. E. Al-Omar, Assistant Undersecretary for Social Development in the Ministry, Naser Ahmed Naser Al-Ammar, Director of the Department of Charity Societies and Philanthropic Organizations in the Ministry and poloff. The Ambassador told the Minister that a poloff attended a camel race in February and witnessed young children atop the animals as they galloped around the track, proof that the ban is being ignored. (Note: The Ministry sponsored a March 2004 law requiring jockeys to be at least 18 years of age and more than 45 kilograms in weight. With parental consent, however, these minimums can be waived.) Should the GOK not address underage jockeys, the Ambassador cautioned, the issue could cause bilateral problems, undesired by both sides.

13. (C) The Minister answered that "we are putting all our efforts to control" the problem. He added that the Public Authority for Youth and Sports is also helping to reduce the number of underage jockeys and claimed that the situation is "much better than before but not at the level we want." Al-Omar said that opponents of age controls argue that using young jockeys is a matter of heritage and culture. According to the Minister, some of the children are the camel owners' sons. The Minister acknowledged that both Qatar and the UAE have agreed to start using robots in place of children later this year. He concluded by saying, "I promise to look into this to find a better solution."

Protections for Domestic Maids

14. (C) The Ambassador also inquired about plans to improve protections for domestic help, who come primarily from East and South Asia to work as maids, cooks, drivers or groundskeepers. He said that the U.S. does not detect enough progress on this issue over the past year. (Note: Under Kuwaiti labor law, domestic help are not afforded the same protections as unskilled foreign laborers working outside of the home.) The Minister acknowledged that "we do need a law" for maids. He added that most employers have good relations with their maids, but some, the "few and rare," do not. The Minister lamented that the maid issue appears in the Human Rights Report, which "makes Kuwait look bad."

Kuwaitization

15. (C) According to the Minister, Kuwaitization, the process of employing Kuwaitis in positions currently held by expatriate workers in an attempt to reduce dependency on foreign labor, is not progressing to the Ministry's liking. The Ministry would like to increase the number of Kuwaitis in the private sector, but salaries for low- to mid-level positions lag behind those for the public sector. Even with a change to the labor law, requiring the GOK to pay private sector Kuwaiti employees a supplement of 120-200KD (\$415-692) per month, the number of Kuwaitis transitioning from the

public sector is below target. The Minister reported that in the banking sector, for example, half of the employees are Kuwaiti citizens as compared to 39% two years ago. Meanwhile, the Minister added, MPs want to increase public sector wages, which would undermine further the Ministry's goals.

Removal of Islamic Charity Kiosks

16. (C) Eighty-seven Islamic charity kiosks, placed on Kuwaiti streets to collect donations from passers-by, have been removed by the GOK, according to the Minister who labeled this revenue generation method a "place of leakage" in terms of accountability and tracking. Initially, he said, the Ministry faced resistance from some MPs and the Ministry of Information. Once the Council of Ministers lent its support to the kiosk removal campaign, however, opposition subsided and the program began in earnest. The Minister provided the Ambassador with a working paper from the February "International Conference for Fighting Terrorism" in Riyadh, which he claimed would answer any questions the U.S. may have regarding Kuwait's charity box removal. A visiting team from the Treasury Department is scheduled to meet with Al-Omar in the coming days.

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